

How Does Objective Career Success Affect Subjective Career Success? The Moderating Role of Self-Awareness

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Abstract

Studies on the relationship between objective career success and subjective career success are seldom in the career success research. In this study, we hypothesize a positive relationship between objective career success and subjective career success. Moreover, we conduct interview to find out the new indicators for measuring the subjective career success in Chinese context. Further, we come up with self-awareness as moderator. We hypothesize that people with high public self-awareness have strong relationship between objective career success and subjective career success; people with high private self-awareness have weak relationship between objective career success and subjective career success. However, the results are not entirely as expected. The public self-awareness has impact but the private self-awareness has no impact on this relationship.

Keywords

Subjective Career Success, Objective Career Success, Private Self-Awareness, Public Self-Awareness

1. Introduction

Career success as a subject of formal study has captured the interest of a variety of researches (e.g. Heslin, 2005 [1]; Greenhaus, 1990 [2], 2000 [3]; Nicholson, 2000 [4]; Thorndike, 1934 [5]). Career success is important not only to individuals but also to organizations because employees' personal success can eventually contribute to organizational success (Judge, Higgins, Thoresen, & Barrick, 1999) [6]. The literatures on this topic focus on two main schools of thought. One school focuses on identifying the individual and organizational factors that

facilitate employees' career success (e.g., Boudreau, Boswell, & Judge, 2001 [7]; Judge & Bretz, 1994 [8]; Seibert & Kraimer, 2001 [9]; Wayne, Liden, Kraimer, & Graf, 1999 [10]). A lot of studies have taken broad-based multivariate approaches to identifying the predictors of career success (e.g., Ng & Eby, 2005 [11]; Kirchmeyer, 1998 [12]; Seibert & Kraimer, 2001 [9]). Another school focuses on the nature of career success (Heslin, 2005 [1]; Arthur, 2005 [13]; Greenhaus, 2003 [14]; Sturges, 1999 [15]). Career success has been operationalized between the objective and the subjective career success (Hughes, 1937 [16], 1958 [17]). Objective career success is defined by verifiable attainments, such as pay, promotions, and occupational status, which have long been considered the hallmarks of career success across a wide range of societies (Nicholson, 2000 [4]; Heslin, 2005 [1]). Subjective career success is defined by an individual's reactions to his or her unfolding career experience (Hughes, 1937 [16], 1958 [17]; Heslin, 2005 [1]). Almost all empirical studies about career success are assessed in terms of current salary, the number of promotions received over the entire career (that is, objective career success) and career satisfaction (that is, subjective career success) (Greenhaus, 2000 [3]; Seibert & Kraimer, 2001 [9]).

However, popular operationalizations for the objective and subjective career success rarely fail to change with the time. With the emergence of the boundaryless career (Arthur, 2005) [13] and protean career (Hall, 1976 [18], 2004 [19]), the criteria of objective and subjective career success may be different from the existing criteria. Besides, although there are studies focusing on the nature of the objective success and subjective success, the relationship between objective and subjective success has not been fully explored. This relationship goes to the heart of the most important problems and challenges in the career field (Nicholson & Waal-Andrews, 2005) [20].

The first purpose of the current study is to investigate the relationship between the objective success and the subjective success. Hall & Chandler (2005) [21] have developed a psychological success model to measure the relationship between the objective success and the subjective success. Their study emphasizes that the subjective success has impact on objective success. "The report on the people's happiness in the workplace (2010)" (Dec, 2010) published in China shows that the higher the people in the status in workplace, the lower happiness they feel. It is also found that the happiness of senior professional managers is lower than other people in workplace. The result shows that objective success has different impact on the subjective success.

The main contribution of the current investigation is to provide a moderator "self-awareness" to investigate the relationship between objective success and subjective success, analyzing the impact of the objective success on the subjective success.

The second purpose of the current study is to measure the indicators of the subjective success and objective success in the People's Republic of China, where there is large variance on career success discretion in people in different types of firms. The criteria of career success in China may be different from western world as a result of the different philosophy behind these two cultures. In this study, we try to use qualitative research to find the criteria of objective career success and subjective career success in Chinese context, and then use the criteria to measure the variables in our study.

2. Theoretical Background

Career success is defined as the accumulated positive work and psychological outcomes resulting from one's work experiences (Seibert & Kraimer, 2001) [9]. Career success was further explained as having both objective and subjective components (Gattiker and Larwood, 1988 [22]; Judge *et al.*, 1995 [23]; Nabi, 1995 [24], 2003 [25]; Baruch, 2004 [26]; Breland *et al.*, 2007 [27]; Rasdi, 2009 [28]). The first includes variables that measure objective or extrinsic career success (e.g., Gutteridge, 1973) [29]. Objective career success refers to the external categories in a profession, which are defined by society, one's peers or culture, and illustrates the typical steps towards success (Rasdi, 2009) [28]. The movements may be horizontal (increased job security, longer vacations) or hierarchical (promotion, different job title) (Nabi, 1999) [30]. Subjective career success reflects an individual's perception of career experience, which is influenced by a person's own preferences for development, needs and values (Gattiker and Larwood, 1986 [31]; Rasdi, 2009 [28]).

2.1. Objective Career Success

Measures of objective career success are typically external indicators of career advancement or the accumulation of extrinsic rewards (Feldman & Ng, 2007) [32]. Salary (Thorndike, 1934) [5], salary growth (Hilton & Dill, 1962) [33] and promotions (Thorndike, 1963) [34] are the most widely used and readily accessible indicators of

career success (Heslin, 2005 [1]; Hall, 1976 [18], 2002 [35]). The objective career success also include the highest level of education or hierarchical level attained, highest salary earned, rate of movement up an organizational ladder, and badges of accomplishment (e.g., professional honors) (Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001 [9]; Feldman & Ng, 2007 [32]). Nicholson and Waal-Andrews (2005) [20] suggest that six objective success outcomes recur:

- 1) Status and rank (hierarchical position).
- 2) Material success (wealth, property, earning capacity).
- 3) Social reputation and regard, prestige, influence.
- 4) Knowledge and skills.
- 5) Friendships, network connections.
- 6) Health and well-being.

2.2. Subjective Career Success

Measure of subjective career success is typically attitudes, emotions, and perceptions of how individuals feel about their accomplishments rather than the objective amount of achievement. Career satisfaction is most often assessed using the widely adopted (e.g., Boudreau *et al.*, 2001 [36]; Judge *et al.*, 1995 [37]; Seibert & Kraimer, 2001 [9]; Heslin, 2005 [1]) career satisfaction scale developed by Greenhaus *et al.* (1990) [2]. Researchers have examined such variables as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and professional identification (Hall, 1976 [18]; Judge, Cable, Boudreau, & Bretz, 1995 [37]; Feldman & Ng, 2007 [32]). In addition, subjective career success also include a wider range of outcomes, such as a sense of identity (Law, Meijers, & Wijers, 2002) [38], purpose (Cochran, 1990) [39], and work-life balance (Finegold & Mohrman, 2001) [40]. Nicholson and Waal-Andrews (2005) [20] summary the criteria of subjective career success in the literature:

- 1) Pride in achievement.
- 2) Intrinsic job satisfaction.
- 3) Self-worth.
- 4) Commitment to work role or institution.
- 5) Fulfilling relationships.
- 6) Moral satisfaction.

2.3. Improving Subjective Career Success Measurement in Chinese Context

Heslin (2005) [1] proposed three avenues for improving the conceptualization and measurement of subjective career success. There is 1) drawing upon research into what employees want, 2) paying greater attention to how people in different career contexts conceptualize their career success, and 3) adopting more qualitative methods. Owing to the cultural differences between eastern and western, people in different cultural context may feel different subjective career success. This study will adopt in-depth interview and survey to pay attention to how people in Chinese context conceptualize their subjective career success.

2.4. Self-Awareness

Self-awareness rests at the core of a person's sense of self; thus, the human capacity to direct attention toward the self has fundamental personal, social, and cultural consequences (Goukens, 2009) [41]. According to original self-awareness theory (Duval and Wicklund, 1972) [42], self-focused attention makes people more conscious of their attitudes and beliefs (Gibbons, 1990) [43]. Duval and Wicklund's (1972) [42] self-awareness theory and Carver's (1979) [44] cybernetic model of self-attentive process proposed that a dichotomy exists between environment-directed attention and self-directed attention.

2.5. The Relationship between Objective Career Success and Subjective Career Success

Why happiness of senior professional managers is lower than other people in workplace? That is, why objective career success has negative effect on subjective career success? This study introduces self-awareness to illustrate this phenomenon.

Hypothesis 1: Objective career success has positive impact on subjective career success.

When someone is private self-awareness, they will be more self-directed and will focus on more their own

mind. Thus, the effect of the evaluation from the social environment is weak.

Hypothesis 2: Private self-awareness will moderate the relationship of objective career success and subjective career success. When the private self-awareness is high, the relationship of objective and subjective career success is low.

However, when someone are public self-awareness, they will be more environment-directed. Thus, when others comment that the person with high objective career success is successful, the person himself will consider himself successful and the subjective career successful is high.

Hypothesis 3: Public self-awareness will moderate the relationship of objective career success and subjective career success. When the public self-awareness is high, the objective career success will be more positively related to subjective career success.

The model of this research is as **Figure 1**.

3. Method

3.1. Data and Sample

We collected survey data from employees of three main cities, which are Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin. A total of 376 employees (88% response rate) completed surveys. The average age of employee respondents was 26 years; 40% were male and 60% were female; 25% were married; 73% held a bachelor’s degree and 27% held a master’s or higher degree.

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Independent Variable

Salary (Thorndike, 1934) [5], salary growth (Hilton & Dill, 1962) [33] and promotions (Thorndike, 1963) [34] are the most widely used and readily accessible indicators of career success (Heslin, 2005 [1]; Hall, 1976 [18], 2002 [35]). In our study, we selected salary and promotions as the most widely used items, and we also add three different items that hadn’t been used in empirical study yet, which were position, education and medical cost. As Nicholson and Waal-Andrews (2005) [20] suggest that six objective success outcomes, we hope realize five of the all items in this empirical study. With the indicator health, we operated this indicator as medical cost per year. We operated indicator education as the highest level of education they attained. We operated indicator position as the highest level of position they attained during their career path.

3.2.2. Dependent Variable

The study gathered the initial items of the scale for the subjective career success through interview and open-

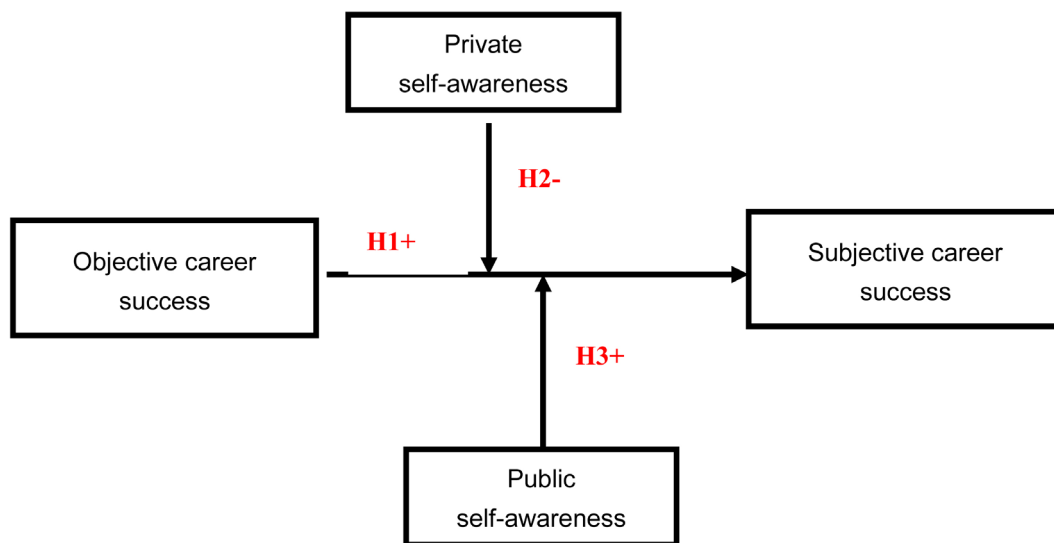


Figure 1. Relationships between objective career success and subjective career success.

ended surveys. In order to guarantee the representativeness of the interview results, we balanced and controlled such aspects as the gender, year of birth, marital status, schooling and management classification. We interview 25 people coming from organizations respectively, including the enterprises, public institutions, government agencies and NGOs. The main purpose of the interview is to find out the criteria for evaluating the career success in different employees; and based on the purpose of study, the several key questions put forward in the interview include: 1) how do you think of “career success”? 2) Do you think your career is successful? 3) Which indexes do you think can measure career success?

This research adopted two forms of interview: face-to-face or telephone interview. Among the total number of 25 people, 23 were interviewed face-to-face and 2 people through the telephone.

The researcher analyzed the audio recording and notes of each interviewee and made coded statistics on the key vocabulary entries by giving the same code to the entries with similar meaning. As to the same entry mentioned in several texts, it was counted as one. Through the analysis of the contents of the texts, the researcher obtained 20 indexes of the subjective career success, and on this basis, the researcher asked other experts with background of human resources to evaluate the work we got done to see whether the codes can reflect the contents of the texts. After confirmation, the researcher combined and classified the 20 indexes together with other two experts, with 15 indexes left after deleting the similar indexes. We use a total item (In general, according to above 16 questions, I am satisfied with my own career.) to test the external validity of subjective career success.

3.2.3. Moderating and Control Variables

Duval and Wicklund’s (1972) [42] self-awareness theory and Carver’s (1979) [44] cybernetic model of self-attentive process proposed that a dichotomy exists between environment-directed attention and self-directed attention. Trait self-consciousness deals with the characteristic difference between individuals in the amount of attention they tend to focus on themselves in private and public situations. The Self-Consciousness Scale (SCS) developed by Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss (1975) [45] consisting of three subscales includes Private Self-Consciousness, Public Self-Consciousness, which has served in several studies as an effective measure of this trait (Buss & Scheier, 1976 [46]; Carver & Scheier, 1978 [47]; Fenigstein, 1979 [48]; Kimble & Zehr, 1982 [49]). This scale was improved by Govern and Marsch. I will use the improved one, the Situational Self-Awareness Scale (SSAS), which was developed by Govern and Marsch (2001) [50]. It concludes nine items (See the questionnaire we provide). The internal consistency of each factor was assessed via Chronbach’s alpha. The α s were 0.82 (Public), 0.70 (Private), and 0.72 (Immediate Surroundings). These are acceptable levels (Nunnally, 1978) [51], especially when one considers that each subscale comprises only three items (Govern and Marsch, 2001) [50].

4. Results

As the independent variable and dependent variable are all formative construct, we choose Smart PLS as our main analysis instrument. We first conducted a multicollinearity test for independent variable and dependent variable. **Tables 1-4** report the results.

Table 1. Multicollinearity test for objective career success: VIF.

	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig.	Multicollinearity	
	B	Std				Margin tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	2.769	1.051		2.633	0.009		
Education	0.085	0.188	0.036	0.450	0.653	0.831	1.203
Position	0.231	0.199	0.100	1.162	0.247	0.737	1.357
Income	0.380	0.158	0.227	2.397	0.018	0.602	1.662
Promotion	0.112	0.126	0.085	0.885	0.377	0.588	1.701
Medical cost	-0.235	0.146	-0.121	-1.613	0.109	0.962	1.040

Dependent: total career satisfaction.

Table 2. Multicollinearity test for objective career success: Condition index.

	Eigenvalue	Condition index	(Constant)	Education	Position	Income	Promotion	Medical cost
1	5.411	1.000	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01
2	0.302	4.235	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.03	0.32	0.11
3	0.158	5.855	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.00	0.02	0.85
4	0.094	7.592	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.73	0.41	0.01
5	0.028	13.827	0.00	0.77	0.19	0.23	0.01	0.01
6	0.007	27.009	0.99	0.21	0.76	0.00	0.23	0.01

Dependent: total career satisfaction.

Table 3. Multicollinearity test for subjective career success: VIF.

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	T	Sig	Multicollinearity	
	B	Std				B	
(Constant)	-0.369	0.214		-1.730	0.086		
a1	0.091	0.041	0.107	2.233	0.027	0.400	2.497
a2	0.107	0.040	0.118	2.687	0.008	0.477	2.097
a3	0.160	0.053	0.171	3.003	0.003	0.283	3.536
a4	-0.130	0.049	-0.137	-2.648	0.009	0.344	2.910
a5	0.039	0.045	0.040	0.857	0.393	0.421	2.378
a6	0.078	0.041	0.082	1.909	0.058	0.495	2.018
a7	0.083	0.051	0.087	1.648	0.101	0.328	3.053
a8	0.111	0.049	0.111	2.283	0.024	0.384	2.603
a9	0.016	0.044	0.017	0.371	0.711	0.423	2.366
a10	0.089	0.043	0.096	2.070	0.040	0.424	2.359
a11	0.031	0.044	0.030	0.704	0.483	0.505	1.979
a12	0.004	0.043	0.004	0.090	0.928	0.436	2.292
a13	0.054	0.056	0.047	0.959	0.339	0.373	2.683
a14	0.039	0.046	0.039	0.844	0.400	0.421	2.374
a15	-0.021	0.047	-0.024	-0.450	0.654	0.323	3.093
a16	0.363	0.040	0.424	8.965	0.000	0.408	2.448

Dependent: total career satisfaction.

Table 1 and **Table 2** show that objective career success does not exist multicollinearity. (VIF < 2, Condition Index < 30).

Table 3 and **Table 4** show that subjective career success does not exist multicollinearity. (VIF < 4, Condition Index < 30). These results support the idea that the two formative constructs (objective career success and subjective career success) are effective.

We use a total item (In general, according to above 16 questions, I am satisfied with my own career.) to test the external validity of subjective career success.

Table 5 shows that the subjective career success has good external validity. (Path coefficients = 0.9199, T value = 51.4954). The Multicollinearity test and external validity show that the objective career success and subjective career success are formative constructs and the formative items are valid.

Table 6 & **Table 7** report the outer weights of two formative constructs (objective career success and subjective career success).

Table 4. Multicollinearity test for subjective career success: Condition index.

Model	Eigenvalue	Condition index	
1	16.038	1.000	
2	0.170	9.726	
3	0.125	11.308	
4	0.108	12.183	
5	0.093	13.132	
6	0.064	15.824	
7	0.058	16.690	
8	0.053	17.345	
1	9	0.047	18.467
	10	0.046	18.606
	11	0.043	19.395
	12	0.035	21.503
	13	0.030	22.932
	14	0.026	24.686
	15	0.025	25.320
	16	0.021	27.937
	17	0.018	29.846

Dependent: total career satisfaction.

Table 5. External validity for subjective career success.

	Path coefficients	Sample mean	Sample deviation	Standard Error	T statistics
Subjective career success-total career satisfaction	0.9199	0.9108	0.0179	0.0179	51.4954

Table 6. Outer weights of objective career success items.

Objective career success	Outer weights	T values
Income	0.7753	2.1693
education	0.0757	0.2199
position	0.1535	0.4955
promotion	0.3918	1.0001
Medical cost	-0.2122	0.6960

We tested Hypotheses 1-3 with Smart PLS.

Table 8 reports that the hypothesis 1 was supported (Path coefficient = 0.2433, T value = 1.9736). Hypothesis 2 was also not supported. (Path coefficient = -0.1547, T value = 0.8448). However, Hypothesis 3 was supported. The moderating role of public self-awareness was supported and the moderating role of private self-awareness was not supported.

5. Discussion

Using a sample of 376 Chinese employees, we find that in China's context, objective career success is positively associated with subjective career success. Public self-awareness moderates the positively relationship between

Table 7. Outer weights of subjective career success items.

Subjective career success	Outer weights	T values
A1	0.1091	0.8880
A2	0.1156	1.0395
A3	0.2100	1.1834
A4	-0.1146	0.7455
A5	0.0389	0.3508
A6	0.0027	0.0210
A7	0.0908	0.7334
A8	0.2034	1.5441
A9	0.0115	0.0844
A10	0.1064	0.8370
A11	0.0152	0.1116
A12	-0.0339	0.2631
A13	0.1026	0.7538
A14	0.0383	0.2843
A15	-0.0544	0.4046
A16	0.4531	2.7434

Table 8. Hypotheses 1-3.

	Subjective career success	T-values
Objective career success	0.2433	1.9736
Objective career success* private self-awareness	-0.1547	0.8448
Objective career success* public self-awareness	0.1848	1.7596

objective career success and subjective career success; this relationship becomes positive for strong public self-awareness employees.

Our research makes several important contributions to the literature on objective career success and subjective career success. First, although most previous subjective career success studies used career satisfaction for measuring subjective career success (Greenhaus, 1990) [2], we conducted in-depth interview to confirm the different indicators in Chinese context. In collectivism culture as in China, subjective career success should be important not only for one person but also for his/her family. People from China choose a job for their “small family” or “big family”, which means family or country.

Second, our study emphasizes the importance of public self-awareness as a moderating variable of objective career success and subjective career success, which the literature has largely ignored (Ng, 2014) [52]. People from collectivism context are more focus on others’ evaluation on themselves. Someone makes a lot of money, has high social status and promote quickly in his organizations, which means objective career success. Because of public self-awareness, others evaluation are important for his subjective career success, so he feels good about his careers. So in collectivism context, public self-awareness is an important variable for career success.

Third, our study shows that private self-awareness is not an effective moderator of objective career success and subjective career success. Individualism and collectivism continues to be a popular dimension in the field of cross-cultural study. Individualistic cultures promote self-realization for their members (Hofstede, 1991) [53]. Individualists see themselves as independent entities, distant from their groups (Triandis, 1995) [54]. Chinese collectivism emphasize family and group goals. Traits of Chinese collectivism are “we” identity, each person is encouraged to conform to society, to do what is best for the group and to not openly express opinions or beliefs that go against it. So it is reasonable that in China private self-awareness has no effect on the relationship between objective career success and subjective career success.

6. Limitation

We collected the information on independent and dependent variables from the same respondents. As with most survey research, reliance on self-reports may limit the validity of the findings. People may have reported objective career success measures different from what could be objectively verified. Besides, the study ignored the past objective career success plays in ones' current subjective career success. Thirdly, some studies showed that objective and subjective success may mutually influence each other (Stumpf, 2012) [55].

7. Conclusion

Using data from the Chinese employees, our study extends the meanings and measurement of subjective career success and verifies the positive relationship between objective career success and subjective career success. We use self-awareness as moderator of objective career success and subjective career success. As collectivism context in China, public self-awareness has impact on the positive relationship. However, private self-awareness has no impact on this relationship. The results call for further efforts to provide an integrative framework that explains conflicting phenomenon that people with high objective career success have low feelings of subjective career success. We hope more researchers will join us in this endeavor.

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